

Babalings

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## GANDALF THE GREY

Gandy was a big grey tom cat, some 4 or 5 years old. A few weeks ago my mother phoned from Hyattsville, and told me that Gandy's summer cold had been too much for him. Gandalf was dead. My brother and sister buried him in a part of the yard where he had liked to nap.

Gandy was what the books call a British Blue--squarish head, chunky body, heavy tail, and a heavy two-layer fur coat, of normal short-hair length on first inspection but with an undercoat of very short downy hair. I've defined Gandy as big. He probably didn't top 16 pounds, but he none-the-less gave the impression that he was a huge cat, probably because of his pronounced jowls and blocky build. He was built like a pro football lineman. I remember the almost fright of the plumber who was somewhat awed by the size of mom's other cat, Whitey, only to then encounter Gandy, who made Whitey look like a shrimp. And one of the first times that Peggy Rae first met Gandy, when he sat up from his napping place on the table, looked Peggy straight in the eyes, and even to me looked almost as large as Peggy.

At the time Gandy was born I was living with my mother, brother, and sister in Hyattsville. Whitey was a reasonably old cat by then--she was born in 1950 and Gandy wasn't born until 1961 or 1962. (The white cat is even older now but still in good health, thank you.) I don't know where Gandy was born, but it was near mom's house. The first time I saw Gandy was one August day when I was grilling something in the back yard--something that had smelled good to a small grey kitten that lived someplace within walking--and smelling--distance. I didn't want another cat, but mom is an easy touch for a hungry dog or cat. Or kitten. The grey one got his handout. And another one a couple of days later. And again. Until one morning we awoke to find that he hadn't gone home the night before.

Gandy was a very satisfactory kitten. He ate almost anything he was offered (a tremendous change from the picky palate of Whitey), he purred, he chased strings and moths and the white cat, he was clean and stayed reasonably clean of fleas (I don't think they could burrow through his two layers of fur), and while the heat of August bothered him he gloried in the coolness of autumn.

About November of that first year, Gandy failed to show up for breakfast one morning. Or for dinner. Or the next breakfast. That was a Saturday. About noon I became quite concerned and went out to call him in earnest. I called for a while from the back porch, and finally heard a very weak "me-ew" and saw Gandy's head emerging from a heavy clump of day lilies in the back yard. Gandy slowly crawled out, using his two front legs only; his back legs were totally useless. "Broken pelvis" said the vet. He held out little hope for Gandy's recovery, but he managed to somehow put Gandy's pelvis back in some kind of order, and a week later Gandy was home again, sick, but with some hope. For six weeks or so it was two pills daily to try to bring the internal bleeding under control, but gradually the blood cleared from his urine and Gandy started to move more than five feet at a time. He never fully

recovered. Never again did I find him perched on a high limb of the dogwood tree; nor could he gracefully flow up the three feet from floor to desk-top; nor was he able to curl into a ball on your lap and purr. Possibly it was because of these disabilities that Gandy decided not to be a cat.

Gandy's uncatlike behavior first showed up in his greeting of family members as they returned home. If Gandy was outside--and usually he was--he'd greet you with a "meow meow meow" as soon as you came in sight, and would walk to the front sidewalk to meet you. He extended his range to the mailbox to help you mail a letter, or to see you off in the morning. For Mom, who walked to the bus some four blocks away, he provided an escort on mornings when he happened to feel like a stroll. He liked to wrestle with my sister (who would take a bit more biting and clawing than the rest of us would accept), and he greatly preferred to have his fur ruffled than stroked. We even called Gandy "dog" for a while. One evening in particular I remember, after Gandy had attained his full growth, and come to the main sidewalk to meet me. Thinking nothing in particular about it, I reached over to pat his head and ruffle his fur, and made my usual comment of "hi, dog," just as a stranger to the neighborhood passed by. I nodded to the passerby who smiled back, glanced at Gandy--and stopped dead in his tracks. You could see him thinking: "Dog? Dog? That's not a dog!"

Gandy might have fooled himself, and had us half-convinced at times, but Gandy was a cat. Ask any dog in the neighborhood who ever tried to raid the cat-food bowls on the back porch when Gandy was near the back porch. (One poor peech found himself trapped on top, where he'd been snitching, when Gandy returned from a stroll. He jumped over the side, some eight feet off the ground, when Gandy started purposefully up the steps after him. Gandy couldn't run much, nor jump more than a couple of feet, but he could growl, and act tough, and look mean. His thick fur gave him all the protection he needed from dogs (though his lack of agility seriously handicapped him in a cat fight), and he had the muscles needed to sink his claws into a dog. He wasn't aggressive, but neither was he of any mood to be a subject of aggression.

I loved that old cat. He was less like a cat than any other I've known, and yet his personality was completely "cat" under the uncatlike exterior. Except, possibly, for the lack of hauteur. He was a stevedore or truckdriver type, and he accepted life that way. Whitey acted like the queen of cats--I'm sure that down inside she believed she was one (now, I think, she believes she's a Dowager Queen.) Let her pose prettily or stalk away in injured dignity if you pushed her off the chair you wanted to sit on. Gandy was a roustabout. If you wanted his chair, you had bloody well have muscles enough to shove aside his dead weight. Of if you wanted to sit there with him, that was all right. Comfortable chairs were too hard to come by to get fussy about squatter's rights. Rest in peace Gandalf. If I can have a cat in the hereafter, I hope it's you.

## FOUR WHEELING, BRIEFLY

The last time that I spoke to any extent about cars in FAPA was evidently in November 1961. Up to that time, I had owned 4 cars--a 1940 Pontiac, a 1951 and a 1957 Ford, and a 1961 Buick. I've owned two more since then--a 1961 Alfa Romeo, and a 1960 Mercedes-Benz.

I bought the Alfa in August, 1963, as a "second" car. The Buick was still in very good condition, and I held on to it as my travelling car, but I wanted a sports car, I had enough cash and credit to get one, and the Alfa seemed like as good a buy as I was going to find.

In the 1961 article I described some of my reactions to the various cars I'd owned: the Pontiac was a monster; the '57 Ford's good travelling qualities were far exceeded by those of the '61 Buick. I bought the Alfa for fun, which the sports car magazines had told me I'd get and which my brother's Fiat-Abarth had taught me could be had.

The Alfa was fun. It's not an economically sound car to own, its engine is fussy, the seat innards are not of the quality they should be, the top design makes the top awkward to put up or down and subject to leaks around the windows even when up, but it's fun. I had the time to fuss with the engine regularly and keep it in top tune, and the car was completely responsive so long as the engine was kept in top shape. In my style of driving a sports car, a fair percentage of steering effort is done with the accelerator--that's why engine performance is critical. The Alfa was a good car to learn that kind of driving on, for even if my timing was off, the car would respond. It would corner on rails, or slip its rear end around, or even let all four wheels drift, as long as I was reasonably close to telling it what to do, and when to do it. You can't really compare it with an American sedan, for no American car I've been in comes even close to the qualities of an Alfa.

I took the Alfa on fairly long distance jaunts, and it wasn't a bad car for distance driving, though overly noisy (from a very busy engine) at speeds of 65mph and higher. The Alfa liked curves, and dips, and narrow bridges. It liked to accelerate and decelerate, whining up and down gears; to be looked at and listened to; to stretch out and assume the shape of the road, blending the earth's surface, the car, and the driver into a gestalt of flowing stability.

With regret, the Alfa was sold in 1964. It could have taught me more about driving, for I had much to learn. It did teach me to expect a lot out of a car.

In 1965, the Buick, which I still owned, started approaching senility. New shocks it wanted. A new front end. A new muffler. These it got. Then it wanted a new transmission. It probably got one, but not from me, for Peggy and I decided that another car might offer lower maintenance costs. The lot where we decided to do business (mainly because we'd been trying out rather a large percentage of their sports cars regularly) happened to have a 1960 Mercedes-Benz 220 SE sedan that day.

The Mercedes is by all odds the darndest car I've owned. I'm both pleased and displeased with it, but luckily the pleasure is uppermost. It's a four-door sedan, approximately as spacious as an American compact. As a car for distance, it exceeds the Buick. Its rated top speed is 105, mine will do at least 90--I've never wanted to go faster than that so I don't know if it will go much above it or not.

The prime difficulty is that it doesn't like to go below 70, and in Maryland and D.C., where most of my driving is done, 60 is the limit. So I drive at 65 or below, mostly below, and the Mercedes responds by being balky, and by needing it plugs cleaned, points changed, and acting generally like a big dog in too small a yard.

I've plowed some money into restoring the Mercedes into proper running shape, but not all that I perhaps should have. The injection system is, I'm sure, slightly out of adjustment. I've had it in the shop a couple of times, and have changed it slightly myself (with amazing success), but still the response that should be there isn't. The gear shift isn't half as smooth as it should be. The tires that it came with I've replaced with good 700-13's, but the car is designed for radial ply 725-13's, which are expensive.

A couple of times I've really pressed the Mercedes, and it's come on. With luck and high revs, I've managed to induce oversteer a few times, and have hauled that sedan around corners that were strictly impossible in the Buick--but were ridiculously easy to the Alfa. I've even found a four wheel drift possible on two occasions. But I've now owned the car for 14 months, and still am not sure of how it will react when I put the pressure on.

My driving isn't particularly radical (pipe down, Peggy), but I do like to drive a car, not just be a passenger in one. The Mercedes is a beautiful car to drive on turnpikes; once you hit 60mph there's nothing more (except air conditioning) that could possibly be wanted. It's shown a few spurts of being an equally excellent car at lower speeds--but they are only spurts. I'd like very much to know how much of the cars performance is due to minor defects from the way it was designed to operate. The tires I've put on, for example, made a fantastic difference. I first put Phillips on the front, and left the old tires on the rear; that corrected heavy steering and general mushiness. A couple of months later there was a sale on Dunlop Gold Seals, so those went on the front and the Phillips were moved to the rear, giving even greater control and ease of steering, and more traction in the back. What, I wonder, would the correct tires do?

I'm going to have to borrow a Mercedes from my dealer one of these days, just to find out if I'm missing the performance that I think is there. I'd not trade mine back for my '61 Buick--there's no question but that the Mercedes is far the better car, even though it isn't quite all that I'd like. But I don't want another Mercedes if they all have the same hints of excellence with the attainment. It's too frustrating.

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I will have some OLD FAPA material for sale at the Tricon. See me there or wirt me fast if you have any specific wants.